

O 191143Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9616
INFO AMEMBASSY ATHENS
AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY DHAKA
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
AMEMBASSY OSLO
AMEMBASSY TOKYO
AMCONSUL CHENNAI
AMCONSUL MUMBAI
AMCONSUL TORONTO
USEU BRUSSELS
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
USMISSION GENEVA
HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
DIA WASHINGTON DC
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
SECDEF WASHDC
CDRUSARPAC FT SHAFTER HI//APCW/APOP//
CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI//J3/J332/J52//

UNCLAS COLOMBO 000310

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA (BOUCHER, CAMP), SCA/INS AND PRM
STATE ALSO PASS USAID
AID/W FOR ANE/SCA, DCHA/FFP (DWORKEN, KSHEIN)
AID/W FOR DCHA/OFDA (MORRISP, ACONVERY, RTHAYER, RKERR)
ATHENS FOR PCARTER
BANGKOK FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA (WBERGER)
KATHMANDU FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA AND POL (SBERRY)
GENEVA FOR RMA (NKYLOH, NHILGERT, MPITOTTI)
USUN NEW YORK FOR ECOSOC (D MERCADO)
SECDEF FOR OSD - POLICY
PACOM ALSO FOR J-5

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: MOPS PREF PHUM PGOV PREL ASEC CE
SUBJECT: Northern Sri Lanka SitRep 35

Ref: A) Colombo 307 B) Colombo 304 C) Colombo 299 D) Colombo 294
E) Colombo 287 F) Colombo 282 G) Colombo 279 H) Colombo 277
I) Colombo 265 J) Colombo 258 K) Colombo 250

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The UN Resident Coordinator informed Ambassador of reports of planes dropping bombs in the Government-designated "safe zone" on March 18. Multiple accounts substantiate reports of civilian retaliation against the LTTE on March 18. Larger numbers of civilians are fleeing into Government-controlled territory. OFDA Regional Advisor interviewed local aid worker who escaped the conflict area on March 18. End Summary.

Aircraft Bombs Safe Zone

¶2. (SBU) UN Resident Coordinator Neil Buhne informed Ambassador of reports that the Sri Lankan Air Force bombed targets within the safe zone late on March 18. Embassy is contacting other sources for corroboration and further detail. (Note: it is likely the Air Force was targeting the LTTE leadership.)

Civilians Retaliate Against LTTE

¶3. (SBU) The nationalist daily newspaper "Island" reported that on March 17 "angry civilians... set fire to an LTTE 'police' station at Puthumathalan in the civilian safety zone after LTTE cadres shot dead parents of a child whom they made an abortive bid to abduct. They also shot dead the child before retreating among violent protests." Military Spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara, in a press briefing on March 18, noted that this incident sparked wider protests by IDPs, which included the burning of LTTE vehicles. Embassy cannot substantiate all the details of these reports, but

they are consistent with earlier information regarding retaliation against the LTTE by IDPs (Ref A).

IDPs Fleeing Conflict Zone

¶ 14. (SBU) News reports indicate as many as 2,000 civilians entered Government-controlled territory on March 18, taking advantage of the chaos to escape. Among this total, 643 civilians fled the conflict area in dinghies on March 18 and were reportedly rescued by the Sri Lankan Navy. Newspapers, as well as a military contact, attest the Navy chased away LTTE boats which were attempting to halt the civilians' escape. Government owned "Daily News" reports the LTTE may have fired on the flotilla of dinghies before the Navy drove them off.

¶ 15. (SBU) OFDA Regional Adviser met on March 18 with a group of 15 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Vavuniya who fled the "safe zone", including a Sri Lankan employee of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). This contact reported that the LTTE is now widely recruiting from among the trapped population, forcing both young and old to fight, and is positioning its artillery within civilian concentrations. The IOM worker confirmed the skirmish on March 17 following LTTE attempt to forcibly recruit civilians who were offloading food supplies, leading to wider retaliation by the IDPs. The IOM worker and his family fled the

conflict zone at 2:30a.m. on March 18 by crossing the lagoon on foot. He reported that LTTE forces fired on his group of 15 people in an attempt to stop their flight. When they neared the Sri Lankan military side, army soldiers provided cover fire for the civilians to safely exit the lagoon. They have since been transported to one of the newly prepared IDP sites at Manik Farms, Vavuniya.

Defense: "Pro-LTTE" Elements in International Organizations

¶ 16. (SBU) Defense spokesman Minister Keheliya Rambukwella asserted that certain international organizations have been "infiltrated by the LTTE" and are helping to spread disinformation. In discussing the widely-publicized statement of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navanetham ("Navi") Pillay noting 2,800 civilian deaths and 7,000 injuries, the spokesman claimed: "There are certain pro-LTTE elements in international organizations holding high ranking posts. They are taking cover behind these organizations in order to support the LTTE." (Note: Pillay, a South African national, happens to be an ethnic Tamil but to our knowledge, has never visited Sri Lanka.)

Food, But Still No Meds

¶ 17. (U) Offloading of 500MT of food aid from the Vin-Tan cargo vessel will finish by the end of today (March 19). The vessel will return to Trincomalee by March 20. The World Food Program aims for another food shipment during the week of March 23-27. The ICRC confirmed that the Government did not provide any medical supplies for the evacuation ferry which departed for the safe zone the night of March 18.

¶ 18. (U) Colombo 307 (Ref A) reports on the Ambassador's meeting with Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister in which the Ambassador raised the range of U.S. concerns.

BLAKE